



Fire Service Response to Terrorism

Statement by

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Testimony of
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I am Chief Edward Plaugher of the Arlington County, Virginia, Fire Department. I would like to begin by thanking the Committee for convening this hearing and for including Arlington County.

The stunning and tragic events of September the eleventh have starkly illustrated the role of the fire and emergency service in responding to and mitigating incidents of terrorism. For the past five years, fire chiefs have testified before the Congress on what we knew would be inevitable, that if lives were to be saved in a terrorist incident, local public safety agencies, particularly fire departments, would be responsible.

The needs of the fire service in responding to terrorist incidents are significant. I will focus my testimony on several issues.

First is the need for all-hazard planning and preparation. This concept is simple. It is based upon the principle that we will almost never know the exact circumstances that will lead to a crisis. In the years I have been involved at the local, state and federal levels with respect to the terrorism preparedness issue, I had never heard of a scenario like the one that played out September 11th. With specific risk hazards in mind, we must pursue an all hazards approach to planning that will allow us the best possible preparation for any event, whether it involves explosives, chemical or biological agents, radiological materials or any combination thereof.

Second, we are aware of a National Threat and Warning System that allows for the rapid dissemination of information to law enforcement agencies across the country. The fire service must be made part of this system. Our role in responding to these incidents has been demonstrated. Information relevant to the likelihood of an event must be disseminated to local fire departments as well as law enforcement agencies. We need to eliminate, to the extent possible, the element of surprise.

The issue of communications interoperability has been a long-standing challenge to the public safety community. The ability to communicate effectively in a terrorist incident is paramount to an effective mitigation effort. On September 11th, with so many agencies responding to the Pentagon, we had to provide fire fighters from surrounding jurisdictions hand-held radio's that allowed them to communicate with us and with each other. The frequencies under which their own equipment operated were all different.

Thus, fire fighters were forced to use communications equipment that they had never operated before or even seen. We simply did not have sufficient hardware to provide to all responders and focused on those who were at most risk in forward operations. The rest relied upon the communications technology perfected by the ancient Greeks: runners carrying messages.

The national solution to this problem lies in the allocation of radio spectrum. Congress should address this issue through the provision of appropriate radio spectrum to public safety agencies.

An initiative underway locally, in the Washington Metropolitan area, called the Capitol Wireless Integrated Network (CapWIN) program, would go a long way towards providing interoperability within our nation's capitol region.

The CapWIN program is the result of a collaborative effort involving the state transportation departments of both Virginia and Maryland, in consultation with the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech and the University of Maryland. If fully implemented, the CapWIN program would provide an interoperable data sharing capability that would allow all public safety agencies in the Washington Metro area to communicate without clogging available radio frequencies.

I believe that CapWIN can also enhance our personnel accountability system by tracking operational duty assignments that can be transmitted to arriving responders electronically. This will facilitate our long-term goal of tracking all responders, from all agencies, to ensure their safety.

The issues of training and equipping the fire service to cope with incidents of terrorism are paramount. Management training provided by the National Fire Academy is excellent. However, in decades past the fire service was given responsibility first for emergency medical services and then hazardous materials response. We found that training that was locally available was the most effective. Programs that provide operational and technical training in terrorism response ought to be provided locally to the extent possible. This means enhancing the locally-based training system to provide the sorts of training that fire fighters will need in future incidents.

Staffing should also be a priority. The International Association of Fire Chiefs has called for federal assistance in hiring an additional 75,000 fire fighters.

It is important for the Committee to understand that in most jurisdictions, fire department apparatus is manned by three-person teams. Under federal administrative law, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) mandates "two-in/two-out" with respect to emergency operations. In most communities, personnel are dispersed to provide geographic coverage. In other words, a fourth fire fighter on an arriving piece of apparatus provides two teams immediately.

This issue was clearly demonstrated in our response to the Pentagon on September the eleventh. Apparatus staffed at three fire fighters had to wait and team with other arriving groups. A swift, safe response to any emergency requires four person staffing on every piece of fire apparatus.

I also believe that if we are to have a properly trained and prepared fire service, we ought to have some assistance at the company officer level with respect to terrorism training. I have struggled with the need to send my officers away, often for weeks at a time, so that they make take part in terrorism response training sessions. It is burdensome and expensive for most local communities. Any staffing initiative undertaken by the federal government should provide for the absence of officers in training and the need for "back filling" in their absence.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to conclude my testimony with what we in the fire service have told the Congress for years. When incidents of terrorism occur, we will respond to protect our communities. How well we are prepared will correlate directly with the number of lives we are able to save and the amount of property damage we will mitigate.

Thank you for having me. I am happy to answer any questions.